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111224Z Apr 05

ACTION EAP-00

INFO	LOG-00	AID-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00	DODE-00	MEDE-00	EB-00
	EUR-00	UTED-00	VC-00	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00	L-00
	VCE-00	AC-00	NSAE-00	NSCE-00	OES-00	OIC-00	OIG-00
	OMB-00	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00	SP-00
	SS-00	STR-00	TRSE-00	T-00	IIP-00	PMB-00	PRM-00
	DRL-00	G-00	SAS-00	/000W			

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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1319
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY
ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY

UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000379

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM SOCI PREL PGOV KIRF VM RELFREE HUMANR](#)

SUBJECT: MEETING WITH AMNESTIED UBCV ACTIVIST THICH THIEN MINH

REF: A) HCMC 364; B) HCMC 142; C) 04 HCMC 190; D) 03 HCMC 836

1. (SBU) On April 9, we met with Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) monk Thich Thien Minh (aka Huynh Van Ba) who had been released from prison February 2 as part of the GVN's 2005 Tet amnesty (ref B). Thich Thien Minh was arrested and tried in 1979 for protesting the GVN confiscation of his pagoda, located in the Mekong Delta province of Bac Lieu. He was sentenced for "activities aimed at overthrowing the people's government" and "propagandizing against the regime." The sentence was extended in 1987 after a failed escape attempt from Xuan Loc Prison, in Dong Nai province, where he was held.

2. (SBU) Minh told us that since his release he has spent most of his time in Bac Lieu with his brother's family. He petitioned the government to return his pagoda, but as the property is now a public school, he has no realistic expectation of its return. Minh told us that representatives of the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) had offered him his own pagoda if he would agree to "defect" from the UBCV to VBS, but that he declined. Minh has problems with local police over renewal of his residency registration, as is required by law. Presently, his registration still shows the former pagoda as his place of residence. He fears that if he registers using his brother's house, as local authorities have encouraged, legally he will lose the right to be called a monk.

3. (SBU) While he appeared physically fit, Minh claimed to have a brain tumor and lung problems from beatings in prison. When we asked for clarification about physical abuse, he said that the last time he was beaten in prison was over 20 years ago. Minh fears to seek treatment for his maladies at a State-run hospital, but he has yet to visit a private doctor. Since his release, Minh said he has received three threatening phone calls from at least two different people. The most recent was in late March. The callers threatened him and his brother's family with physical harm and loss of employment should economic sanctions be imposed on Vietnam due to religious freedom concerns. (Note: On February 3, Thich Thien Minh gave a phone interview with the International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB), based in Paris, in which he called for "true freedom, democracy and human rights in Vietnam." End Note.)

4. (SBU) Minh claimed that, since his release, all of his mail and correspondence is monitored and that at least three policemen keep him under constant surveillance. He said that his cell phone often is jammed, and that he is unable to reproduce printed materials of any kind without police monitoring. During our visit with Minh at the Giac Hao pagoda in HCMC we saw two policemen in static surveillance outside the pagoda, the same number as when we visited pagoda in January (ref C). Despite the police surveillance, Minh has been in contact with the Maryland-based "Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam," the IBIB, Radio Free Asia and Que Huong radio, a California-based broadcaster. (Note: Nguyen Thi Hoa and Nguyen Vu Viet, the niece and nephew respectively of activist priest Nguyen Van Ly, were imprisoned after contacts with the Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam and Que Huong Radio, see Ref D. End Note.) Since his release, Minh has been able to visit UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do twice. He also traveled to Binh Dinh Province to visit Thich Huyen Quang without interference from police. Minh said he was unable to see Quang because the UBCV patriarch was in seclusion at the time.

SANCTIONS, POLITICS AND RELIGION

15. (SBU) In our discussion, Minh emphasized that the goals of the UBCV were "not political in nature," but "to have true religious freedom in Vietnam, political change is necessary." He explained that because at its core Communism is atheistic, the UBCV believed that the Party could never permit true religious freedom. Therefore, the United States needs to press the GVN to change. That said, Minh opposed sanctions to force the GVN to improve religious freedom and human rights conditions. He argued that religious freedom advocates and political dissidents become no more than "bargaining chips" for the GVN to trade for economic gain.

16. (SBU) Minh said that he and "many others" were unhappy with recent statements attributed to Ambassador Marine on police in Vietnam. Minh said that police in Vietnam and police in the United States are different; "one protecting a democratic regime, the other defending a dictatorship." We clarified the Ambassador's statement and made it clear that the USG strongly supports Vietnamese activists in their efforts to obtain greater civil and religious rights. However, we cannot stand beside activists if their actions cross beyond the boundaries of accepted norms of basic public order and behavior. (Note: A Viet Kieu newspaper in California erroneously quoted the Ambassador as saying in mid-March speech in San Francisco that "in America,

people who oppose the police would be arrested." The Ambassador actually said that "if an American strikes a police officer, then that American would be arrested and subject to possible prosecution." End Note.)

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